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Sleep Well, Campers, Under Montana's Boundless Big Sky

Camping out under the Big Sky is one reason many of us choose to live in Montana.

Almost a third of Montana households will go camping between the first of July and the end of September, according to the University of Montana Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research. That makes camping the third most popular form of outdoor recreation in the state after wildlife watching and day hiking, the institute reports.

It's not hard to figure out why: the taste of s'mores, the crackle of the campfire, the scent of fresh pines, and the sight of an endless canopy of stars – all enjoyed in the company of friends and family. I'm sure you can add plenty more to this list of the pleasures that camping has to offer.

Camping, and the outdoor activities that often accompany it, can be a great way to enrich your mental and physical health. Here are some tips for making your next campout a memorable occasion – for all the right reasons.

Water, Water Everywhere

Montana is known for its pristine lakes and streams, but don't drink from them no matter how clean they look. You don't want your souvenir of a great camping trip to be *Giardia*, a common parasite that can cause nausea, bloating, gas, stomach cramps, and diarrhea.

If you're traveling by car or RV, bottled water is a good option. Just be sure to dispose of the empties responsibly.

If you're hiking, there are easy and inexpensive ways to purify drinking water. Visit a camping store before your trip to find out what's available, or check these tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/travel/

It's also important to protect yourself and others from waterborne illness by disposing of human waste properly. If toilets or latrines aren't available, bury waste at least 8 inches deep and at least 200 feet from waterways.

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What's on the Menu

Although many of us equate camping with some of our favorite comfort foods (trail mix, hot dogs, and s'mores come to mind), this is no time to give up on healthy eating. Good nutrition will give you the energy to enjoy outdoor activities like hiking, swimming, mountain biking, and paddling. Bring along some healthy snacks, and follow these tips to keep foodborne illness from ruining your trip:

- Pack food in tight, waterproof bags or containers.
- Keep food in an insulated cooler with ice or frozen gel packs.
- Wash hands and surfaces often. Use hand sanitizer if clean water isn't readily available.
- Keep raw and ready-to-eat foods separate, either in separate coolers or sealed containers.
- Cook foods thoroughly.
- Cook only what you need for each meal. Chilling leftovers in a cooler may melt the ice and allow stored foods to become contaminated.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has oodles of great advice on protecting and improving your outdoor dining experience:

www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_sheets/food_safety_while_hiking_camping_&_boating/index.asp

Weather or Not

Remember that the temperature in the mountains, especially at night, is likely to be cooler than it was back home. Be prepared for all types of weather; storms can move in quickly.

- To prevent hypothermia at night, bring enough bedding and clothing to stay warm.
- Use a plastic groundcover under your tent to stay dry.
- To prevent heat-related illness, drink plenty of alcohol-free and sugar-free fluids. Don't wait until you're thirsty to take a drink.
- Wear layers of light, loose clothing that you can add or remove as needed.
- When it's hot, rest often in shady areas.
- Protect yourself from the sun with sunscreen, lipscreen, sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed hat.

What Goes There

Wild flora and fauna present two potential threats: they may be dangerous in their own right, like bears and poison ivy, or they may carry diseases they can pass on to people, like rabies (bats), hantavirus (mice), West Nile virus (mosquitoes), and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (ticks).

So enjoy wildlife from a distance. Don't try to feed, touch, or approach the critters. Here are some more tips for getting along with your temporary neighbors:

- Use insect repellent that contains DEET and apply to both clothes and exposed skin.
- Check for ticks regularly and remove them promptly.
- Wear long pants and sleeves to repel insects and protect against poison ivy.

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- Don't keep food in your tent or sleeping area; stow it in your car overnight or pack it in animal-resistant containers and store where varmints can't reach it.
- Don't sleep in the same clothes you cook and eat in.

With the proper precautions, and a rousing round of “Kumbaya” around the campfire, your camping trip can be the great adventure and bonding experience that you and your family hoped for.

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